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VIII

Panther and Ostrich

SEVERAL DAYS WERE spent by us among the volcanic table-mountains of the Jabal Tubayk. Precipitous cliffs, riven and pinnacled rocks rise some six hundred feet from flower-sprinkled level pastures and valleys strewn with black lava boulders. It is a country of savage beauty, in which gazelles and game birds are numerous.

There Faris and I, out after game, chanced to come on three tents tucked away in a hollow. They belonged to members of that curious folk, the Sulkan (singular: Sleyb)—nomadic hunters and handicraftsmen. In the popular sense they resemble the gypsies. Like them they doctor man and beast, love music, are fortune-tellers, and have a weakness for things occult and superstitious.

As hunters, trackers and scouts the Sulkan surpass the other Bedouins, and they know the desert better than any other nomads. Many a secluded water-hole is known only to them. Their origin is a mystery. They are few in number, but are held together by some sort of tribal organization, under a chief; and they pay tribute—"protection money"—to the Ruala and other Bedouin tribes. In return, each of these appoints from among its own tribesmen a "Brother" to the Sulkan, charged with looking after their interests.

The Chief of the Sulkan was then one Ralib welde Tulihan, and it was to this young man that the little camp we had discovered belonged. Ralib, accompanied

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622 563 by his wife and children, and two brothers and their families, was on his way north to the Ruala (five or six hundred miles mean nothing to these people) to treat with his "Brother" there for the recovery of some thirty Sulkan camels which, he said, a band of unidentified Ruala had driven off.

281 342 563 [291] One of the tents of these Arab gypsies was made of sewn gazelle skins. For tent-pegs they used oryx horns. I observed that these people had no vessels made of wood; all I saw were of leather. In place of rugs and cushions they used the skins of asses, ostriches, panthers, and antelopes. Their clothing, too, excepting the shepherd's cloaks, was made of pelts and hides.

000 Faris proposed to Ralib that he should guide us into the Nufud and promised to charge himself with the matter of the camels and round them up as soon as he returned to the tribe; Ralib's family, meanwhile, were to wander northward without him. Ralib accepted; and soon thereafter we departed from the wild Jabal Tubayk.

224 We had followed Ralib's lead for several uneventful days when, on reaching a *wadi*, he pointed out the fresh tracks of a panther. Leaving our camels behind under guard, we followed the trail on horseback for some distance, when suddenly our mares snorted through wide-open nostrils; they had winded the beast of prey. We dismounted and crept cautiously towards an escarpment, where Ralib surmised the panther was in hiding. It had been there, in fact, but its tracks led farther: Ralib, the Sleyb, made sure that the panther had struck down a gazelle in that very place and had dragged it off. The

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5. *ekfaw čema' ṭejren ḳalab râseh al-ḥûm*
bfeğğen 'amîḳ w-lâ jindara' wên ḥâmi
6. *adna' manâzelhom šeṭâṭa w-lamlûm*
w-aḳṣa' manâzelhom medâḥ an-na'âmi
7. *elja lefejt 'ad-dîre aṣḥâb min ḳowm*
ehreğ tara' ḥamz ar-rağâl al-'elûmi.

1. I lament for my kinsmen, O people! I am not among those who are abused,
For I think that one who laments for his kinsmen deserves not abuse.
2. I reached the spot where the herds used to rest and where my heart was light,
Where stood the tents of beloved friends and uncles.
3. This is the fireplace with the small pit half covered in,
And the spot where so often rested the coffeepots from Damascus.
4. Here always were tied up their horses
With the white circle round their eyeballs and their heads almost four-cornered.
5. They departed like a falcon whose head has been turned by yearning for flight, circling
Above a broad ravine, so that no man can tell where it flies.
6. Their nearest camping places are between Šeṭâṭa and Lamlûm,
Their farthest where the ostriches are hatched.
7. If you reach their territory, bring tidings unto my friends who are amid enemies.
Behold! tidings are for men what *ḥamz* pastures are for camels.

The poet was a negro encamping with the 'Amârât, who fell in love with a Bedouin woman and was driven away by her relatives. They threatened him with death if he returned to their encampment. The poem was recited by Ḥmâr abu 'Awwâd. It may be interpreted thus: the poet longs for his friends. He visits the place where he was last encamped with them, remembers and laments, not knowing when and where he will meet with them.

Verse 2. *Ḥullân* here means the negro's faithful friends and also his beloved. *'Amâmi* are the Bedouins with whom he encamped and whom he served, for every negro has among

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the Bedouins a family whom he serves and whom he calls his uncles. 3. In the men's compartment a small pit varying in shape and size is dug for the fire, so that years afterwards it shows who had encamped there previously. 4. Some clans have a preference for horses whose eyeballs vanish in a white circle; they call them *ḥowka'*. 6. Šeṭâṭa and Lamlûm are settlements in Irak. Ostriches are hatched in the Nefûd southeast of Šeṭâṭa. 7. The plants upon which the camels thrive best are called by a single word, *ḥamṣ*.

1. *'Ajni ǧezat 'an nowmiha bân al-aṣbâḥ*
   w-'ajni ǧezat 'an nowmiha w-asharatni
2. *ǧît al-manâzel rab'ana w-ǧît al-emrâḥ*
   w-laḳejt marka' delâlahom ḏakkaratni
3. *jâ dâr lâ tebčîn amren maẓa' w-râḥ*
   dowr as-sene jâ dâr erǧîhom etni
4. *fâraḳatni já dâr čal-bedr w-enlâḥ*
   jowm erḥalat jâ dâr mâ šâwaratni.

1. My eyes have had enough of sleep, morning has appeared;
   My eyes have had enough of sleep and have awakened me.
2. I went into the encampment of our comrades and to
   the spot where the herds had passed the night,
   And I found where their coffeepots had rested, and
   these brought back much to my mind.
3. O camping place! mourn not for the thing which has
   passed away and vanished;
   After a year, O camping place! hope and wait.
4. She left me, O camping place! like the full moon when
   its luster wanes.
   And when she departed, O camping place! she asked
   not for my counsel.

The poet was a member of the Fed'ân tribe, who went on a warlike expedition against the Šammar. He was wounded and taken prisoner, and when he had fully recovered he returned after about six months. His wife, of whom he was very fond, had fallen ill and died. Having learnt of his grievous loss, the Fed'âni hastened to the camping place where he had last been with his wife and described his memories in a long poem, of which Blejhân communicated this fragment to me.

In verse 4 *jowm erḥala:* has the same meaning as *jowm mâtat* (or *râḥat*), she died, passed away.

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pots. *Ḥufra* is the pit in which fire is made in the men's compartment of the tent.

Slîmân law taḳ'od wa-tšûf
al-'arfa waš ğara laha
bên as-swejda w-al-'ala
ḫalğen tadûr 'ejâlaha.

Slîmân, if thou wouldst only sit down and look [thou wouldst see]
By the 'Arfa herds what has happened to them,
How between as-Swejda and al-'Ala
The she-camels now seek their young.

Slîmân eben Meršed, the chief of the Ḳmuṣa, who call all camel herds "al-'Arfa," made a raid against the Rwala but was defeated and pursued as far as the inner desert. Then, before he could return home, Eben Ša'lân attacked his camp between as-Swejda and al-'Ala and captured many of his herds. The riding camels of Eben Meršed's troop after returning to camp sought for their weaned calves in vain, for the Rwala had driven them away.

Al-mešrefe tarṭan raṭîn
tağâwabat hi w-al-'ala
eben ša'lân aḫâl surûğ
zowden 'ala ḥomṣ w-ḥama'

Al-Mešrefe all the time is jabbering,
Talking with al-'Ala
How Eben Ša'lân loaded corn at Surûğ
More than he would find in Ḥomṣ and Ḥama'.

Surûğ is a settlement between as-Swejda and al-'Ala, inhabited by *fellâḥîn* who cultivate the fields of Eben Meršed's house. Al-Mešrefe is peopled by Circassians, who also own some settlements in al-'Ala. Their language is not understood by the Rwala, hence the phrase: "She [al-Mešrefe] is jabbering, *tarṭan raṭîn.*" After defeating the Ḳmuṣa and plundering Eben Meršed's camp, the victorious Rwala took all the corn stored at Surûğ.

Jâ lâbeti tawen ẓirebt al-kejf
w-al-ẓabd ğalejna ṣadîh
min 'ağğeten ṣârat 'alejhom
bên as-swejda w-al-'ala'.